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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 001669

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SOLANA'S MIDDLE EAST ADVISOR PROVIDES READ-OUT OF SYRIA TRIP AND EXPRESSES FRUSTRATION WITH ARAB LEAGUE OVER MEDITERRANEAN UNION NEGOTIATIONS

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Classified By: Pol M-C Chris Davis for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Christian Jouret, Middle East Advisor to EU/HR Javier Solana, provided Deputy Political M-C with an extensive read-out of Solana's recent trip to Syria, indicating Solana's continued wariness of Syrian President Assad, while noting some desire by the French, in particular, to move forward on the long delayed EU-Syrian Association Agreement. Jouret said Assad emphasized his intention to exchange ambassadors with Lebanon, but put off moving forward on border demarcation; criticized the Saudi role in the region and the current state of affairs in Iraq, and offered to "mediate" between the West and Iran. Solana pressed Assad on Lebanon relations, human rights, and economic reform, and made no commitment to move forward on the shelved EU Association Agreement. On the upcoming EuroMed Ministerial, Jouret said Arab League insistence on enhanced observer status at all levels of the proposed Union for the Mediterranean was threatening the success of the November 3-4 meeting in Marseille, angering the French. End Summary.

Solana's Syria Visit

¶2. (C) Jouret said Solana met with Syrian President Bashir Assad, Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, and Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa (whom Jouret described as "out of it") during his October 23 visit. Solana and Assad met with the larger group (including Mark Ott, the French Ambassador to Syria, and Jouret) for ten minutes, followed by a 50 minute one-on-one conversation. Jouret emphasized that his read-out was second hand, as provided to him by Solana. He said there was a good atmosphere for the overall visit, and that it was clear Syria was seeking to improve relations with the EU. Much of the conversation focused on Syrian-Lebanese relations, with Assad assuring Solana that Syria and Lebanon will exchange ambassadors by the end of the year, and that the delays only came because of the need to find an appropriate building in Beirut. On this issue Jouret said Solana believed Assad would do as promised, so that he can show he is moving forward. Assad was less forthcoming on borders, on which Solana pressed him, saying that they would be delineated "some day," but that it was "too early" now. He told Solana he has "excellent" relations with the Lebanese president (which Jouret said Solana found a bit "worrisome.")

¶3. (C) Assad was very critical of the Saudis, claiming they were providing money to the Salafists in Lebanon and Syria and accusing them of involvement in the September 27 car bomb in Damascus through Iraqi groups. (Conversely, Jouret said, the Saudis were very tough in talking to Solana about Syria, with the Saudi King calling Assad a "liar.") Assad emphasized to Solana the secular nature of the Syrian regime

and claimed he is fighting radical Islamism in Syria. He told Solana he wanted to rein in Imans and to "educate" them as a way of controlling the messages at mosques (a prospect Jouret found a bit troublesome from a human rights perspective). On Iraq, Assad criticized the internal political situation, said the security agreement with the U.S. was not popular in Iraq and should be renegotiated, and said the constitutional pact needs to be revised. Assad offered to "mediate" between the West and Iran, an offer Jouret said Solana politely declined.

¶4. (C) On Israel and Palestinian issues, Assad told Solana that he was trying to convince the Hamas leaders in Damascus to moderate their stance and to engage in broader political life. Assad also expressed appreciation for the Turkish moderated talks with Israel and expressed hope that the talks would resume once there was a new government in Israel.

¶5. (C) For his part, according to Jouret, Solana had several issues on which he pressed Assad, with Syria-Lebanon relations topping the list. He emphasized that the EU wanted to see a clear and broad improvement in relations, starting with the exchange of ambassadors, and including a demarcation of borders. Solana urged Assad to distance Syria from Iran, arguing that their association did Syria no good. He pressed him on support for terrorism, and said Assad turned to the September 27 car-bombing in Damascus, which he blamed on the Saudis. Solana raised human rights, reportedly following up on a list of ten prisoners French President Sarkozy had personally given Assad. Jouret said that three of these individuals have been released, but that Solana pressed Assad to do more. He also raised economic and financial reform, urging Assad to do more to open Syria to business.

¶6. (C) Jouret said that, although Assad asked Solana for

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progress on the long-frozen Association Agreement, Solana made no commitment. Jouret said Solana explained that there is considerable "technical" work to be done before the Agreement could move forward, including updating the 2,000 page four-year-old document to reflect the fact of new members in the EU and new trade and economic realities. Jouret said FM Muallem asked for some "political signal" by the end of the year, to which Solana reacted cautiously, making no commitment. (Note: When we pressed Jouret on what that signal might be or who might be authorized to make it, he said it was not clear, because of the nature of the EU. Jouret said Solana was not inclined at this moment to make such a political signal because he did not think the Syrians had done enough, especially on relations with Lebanon. However, French President Sarkozy might, he opined, want to give some push to the agreement before the end of the year, when the French presidency ends. The European Commission would take the lead in undertaking the revisions and discussions, but the Commission cannot go forward without a green light from the Council. End Note)

¶7. (C) Overall Solana found Assad in a pleasant mood and clearly attempting to press for better relations. Jouret emphasized that Solana was not naive, and that he found Assad to be not trustworthy, but the EU believes it important to seek improved relations with Syria as part of improved overall regional relations.

Union for the Mediterranean Talks
Stalled by Arab League Demands

¶8. (C) Jouret expressed enormous frustration with the efforts to stand up the new Union for the Mediterranean and expressed great concern about the success of the November 3-4 EuroMed ministerial meeting. He noted that there were the "normal" difficulties posed by setting up a new organization of 43 states, including statutes, competition over the

location of a secretariat (with Barcelona, Tunis, and Malta in the bidding), the selection of a secretary general, and decisions on the competencies of the secretariat. And then there were some "real political problems," mainly the Arab League's insistence on enhanced observer status, something the Israelis and many Europeans refused to accept. Jouret said that the Arab League is not a member, and that under the Barcelona Process it was an observer only at foreign ministers meetings. Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa would attend the meetings and be invited to speak on certain issues, but could not block any action. Now Amr Moussa is publicly insisting on Arab League representation at every level at every meeting, from the technical level to the foreign minister level, including in sectoral meetings. Six meetings, including most recently a ministerial conference in Jordan on water, have been canceled over the issue. Israel refuses to go along.

¶9. (C) Jouret said that the EU, including the French, feel the Israelis have made many compromises during this process and that it is the Arab League that is the spoiler. There are high level discussions ongoing, including between the French and Egyptian presidents and foreign ministers, to try to find a resolution before the November 3-4 EuroMed Foreign Ministers Meeting, which was to have signaled the standing up of the new Union for the Mediterranean. He said President Sarkozy is "not happy" with Amr Moussa and wants to "punish him" for his actions, which are creating the potential for a failed meeting. Because of the impasse, the EU will not hold its traditional meeting with the Arab League on the sidelines of the ministerial. Jouret said the meeting itself had not been canceled "for now," but he expressed grave doubts that it would accomplish much.

SILVERBERG

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